

Charlie Chaplin and the Lightness of Humanity:
A Bazinian Analysis
FILM 5900
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One defining trait of Charlie Chaplin as a filmmaker is his relentless exploration of imagination and lightness. Through the Little Tramp character, he champions the underdog and makes opportunities for social critique more palatable by poking fun at himself in addition to his use of physical comedy and other gags. According to Bazin, he purposefully creates worlds that are not made for him (145), and as such he does not hesitate to break all the rules, including those of time itself. Instead, he bends the world to himself, never sacrificing an opportunity to create pockets of joy, as if to wave along the future in favor of what he seems to feel takes precedence. If the future does not exist, (145) we are left to dwell in the present moment, to be so wholly consumed and enchanted that it is only when Chaplin chooses to let the moment die, to shock us back to the story at hand that we are struck with a sense of return to the shallow melancholy of a reality mature to the point of decay, eagerly anticipating his next feat of brilliance so that through it we may once again relive the fleeting joy of imagination and spontaneity his character encapsulates. The following analysis will attempt to contextualize Chaplin within the Bazinian perspective, using examples from the 1925 film, *The Gold Rush*.

It would seem Bazin and Chaplin share something in their approach to film. If Bazin prefers to evaluate a film on its own merit, it would seem that Chaplin does the same in regards to the merit of a given moment, allowing the spectator to become fully engaged and truly affected by the tiny stories he interweaves into the larger sum of his films. Chaplin participates so fully in each moment of his work, it allows us to do the same, making it nearly impossible to deny their emotional power, even in would-be mundane instances. In the bun-dance and shoe-boiling scenes of *The Gold Rush*, he demonstrates his ability and penchant for manipulating

objects to serve purposes contrary to their design, as Bazin discusses on page 146 of *What Is Cinema Vol. 1*. By playing with his food, Chaplin comments on the apparent necessity of respectability, in one reveling in the pure delight of imagination, in the other using it as a means of comparison between expectation vs reality in social class.

The genius here for Bazin is that Chaplin does not linger on these moments. Their power derives from their simplicity, giving such gags the “greatest elliptical clarity,” at which point Chaplin refuses further elaboration (147). It is the economic manner in which Chaplin adventures to capitalize on a given moment that allows him to achieve “a kind of final perfection” (147). Here Bazin also chooses to refrain from elaboration, but one might speculate that he praises Chaplin’s style at least in part for its attempt to transcend the medium of comedy in that he is not weighed down by its instrumentality, evolving the means of presentation and effect through the use of the film medium rather than that of the stage.

It is almost as if Chaplin, whether wittingly or otherwise, attempts to redefine what it means to “make light” of a thing, going beyond the traditional idiomatic sense of the phrase and paring it down to its core meaning, just as he does with the duration of his gags, to get at the essential, human quality of it, making light out of darkness, fun and finesse out of would-be failure, amusement or downright absurdity out of upsetting situations. For example, the instance in which he buries the rifle in the snow outside the cabin indeed connotes a sense of urgency. However, when he takes the time to kick up the surrounding snow like a dog burying a bone, the moment instantly transforms into something cute and clever – that even a dog like the Tramp deserves to ensure self-preservation – and with a brevity singular to this moment, light is made and the spectator dazzled, tickled by the kind of inside joke Chaplin creates, that even in a most serious situation, he must have silliness or perhaps the moment need not be shared at all.

The point here seems to be that the significance of this portion of the shot, perhaps what Bazin might call an “image-fact,” (35), lies in how Chaplin connects the audience with the Tramp’s humanity. Rather than letting us simply laugh at his character, we are more so laughing with Chaplin the writer-director because the precision and intentionality imbued within the action does not leave room for “pandering” (147), nor does it imply degradation of the character. It is through the choice to include this part of the character that makes the moment strong even as it is fleeting. The action is a celebration of foolishness; it is the precise moment in which Chaplin chooses to turn on the light.

Returning to Bazin, this notion parallels perfectly with his idea of “hurdlng a character’s humanity” (22) in regards to Italian Neorealism. Part of what makes the Tramp character so unique is that his ridiculousness is unapologetic, central to the essence of his being. He may frequently act sheepishly as he blunders through interactions with other characters or objects, but the audience knows that it is, at least in part, an act, and that is where we are invited to laugh. We laugh at the playful subversion of authority, at the paradoxical nature of his simultaneous insincere and ingenuous performance of the self, at the wink he gives as he throws the rules of the game out the window and writes his own playbook, or what Bazin summarizes as a rejection of the sacred (153). Yes, the Tramp may not fit into the cold world around him, but we know that surely he will triumph above it in the end, and do so in a most hilarious fashion so as to remind us of the lightness that can be extracted from any situation, for in surrendering ourselves to that light, we become closest to our humanity because that is the moment in which we truly feel, when we leave ourselves behind and become one with our souls.

It is this effect, one could argue, that Bazin feels Chaplin realizes through the Tramp, who left in the hands of a different writer/director may not have such an impact on the viewer. It

is only because of Chaplin's style and understanding of cinema, comedy, and humanity that the Tramp's antics become meaningful glimpses of the joy that comes from embracing the present moment, rather than superficial distractions from the reality other films may try to help us avoid. Although we may get caught up in the slightly tangential effect of some of the gags before being pulled back into the larger narrative, it is in those moments of divergence, however small, that we feel the most connected to the mummified moment shining on the screen and to one another, like a comedic interpretation of the Japanese concept "*ma*." For Chaplin, achieving this effect seems to be a relentless pursuit: the dog and the pants problem while dancing with Georgia, the matter-of-fact way in which he adds sugar cubes to a cup of tea meant to revive him, his euphoric destruction of the cabin after getting a date, his falling backwards down the stairs of the ship only to land beside the woman he loves. These moments are goofy, farcical, and yet they inspire feeling even in their obvious unreality, and it is the feeling that creates realness. They wake us up with laughter, as if to say, "Look how your heart can beat! Isn't it wonderful?"

If, for Bazin, realism in art can only be achieved through artifice (25), perhaps Chaplin's representation of said phenomenon would satisfy him, as it is the artificiality of the Tramp character that makes him so effective. If "every form of aesthetic must necessarily choose between what is worth preserving and what should be discarded, and what should not even be considered," (26) then for Chaplin one might conclude that what is most worth preserving is the opportunity to create lightness and inspire the imagination. Under a Bazinian lens this would serve to inform our humanity, in a manner not unlike De Sica's where tenderness and love will always lie at the heart of his work (69). One might venture to at least partially compare Chaplin to Bazin's lauding of Italian Neorealist films as opportunities "to savor, before time finally runs out on us, a revolutionary flavor in which terror has yet no part" (22), such as the climactic scene

where he and Big Jim's cabin nearly topples over the cliff, demonstrating Chaplin's "unlimited imagination in the face of danger" (148).

If nothing else, *The Gold Rush* and Chaplin's other Tramp films certainly depict and explore a "fundamental humanism" (21) unique to themselves. The Tramp is over-the-top yet humble, mocking yet guileless, cheeky and sweet, and so imbues nearly every moment of his screentime with the same wonderful oddness. He is a myth creating his own brand of mythology, one that refutes expectation, defying reason with reasons of his own that one will simply have to suss out later because he does not have time to wait when there is magic to be made and laughter to be had, even if it is his own expense. He epitomizes spontaneity, but does so with style, transcending the sacred and time itself in order to achieve maximum impact. It is this that Bazin seems to respect, this novel means of communication that does not purport to place the storyteller on a level above his audience but rather to shake their hand, beaming. Perhaps as one of his more "epic" films, *The Gold Rush* serves to demonstrate this effect to a greater capacity, showing that no matter how big or scary or cold the world gets, one can always rise above it so long as they are willing to be themselves in every moment and can remember to take things lightly, aspiring to find the light in everything and in doing so find it in themselves.